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What Do Teacher Leaders Do?

As described in the previous chapter, teacher leaders work as teachers but exercise leadership with their colleagues in improving student learning in their schools. (For a comprehensive description of the activities of teacher leaders, see Collinson, 2004.) It is an important concept; teacher leaders play a critical role in improvement efforts and demonstrate an enhanced sense of professionalism. For teachers to become teacher leaders, and for administrators to promote the development of teacher leaders within their schools, it is essential to describe in greater specificity exactly what it is that teacher leaders do and how they do it. In other words, what are the patterns of behavior that Margaret, Tom, and Elena demonstrated in exercising leadership in their schools?

The characteristics of teacher leaders are divided into two major categories: skills and dispositions. Taken together, these are at the heart of what is meant by teacher leadership. Furthermore, there are important and complex relationships between teacher leadership and administrative leadership; neither can exist without the other.

Leadership Skills

Teacher leadership comprises a number of specific skills. And while not every act of leadership includes all the skills, all acts require most skills, and in roughly the sequence presented here.

Using Evidence and Data in Decision Making

Decisions about what to do in schools are not based on feelings and hunches. Rather, they are grounded in evidence that actions will serve to accomplish a particular purpose. Therefore, when teacher leaders see an opportunity, when they identify a need, their focus on the area is based on evidence. This evidence need not be a single set of discrete data; it may result from informal, although systematic, observation. And it may not depend on hard data at all; it may reflect informal patterns observed (and possibly even documented) over a long period.

For example, Tom's interest was piqued by the data regarding differential participation and achievement rates among different subpopulations of the high school in advanced courses. He recognized that if the school was to honor its commitment to educate all students to high levels, such patterns had to be broken. But the first step in changing the pattern was to understand it; for this, the observation of classes (including his own) and the interviews with students were absolutely critical. And when he and his colleagues made some changes and achieved results, those results were captured in data, both hard data regarding enrollment and anecdotal data regarding student willingness to participate in discussions and to take risks in class.

Margaret noticed that her students were not fully engaged in the museum's exhibits; she saw that they preferred milling about in the gift shop over learning from the docents. Her evidence in this case was her observation of student conduct. Elena, on the other hand, was persuaded by the research literature on student grouping and achievement as a consequence of the relationships between teacher and students. In addition, through conversations with educators in other schools using the looping model, she learned of the results that came from practicing the approach.

Other teacher leaders might be motivated in their choice of areas to improve by an observation (frequently supplemented by the comments and complaints of other teachers) that students are seriously deficient in an important aspect of their learning, such as writing. They may have determined, and may have been told by teachers from the next grade or level, that students' writing is unclear, poorly organized, and weak in its use of language.

Teacher leaders do not interpret evidence and data narrowly; they fully understand the limitations of standardized tests. Although test results can, at times, point to a weakness in a school's program, there are many other sources of evidence of both problems and indications of progress that can be used. These include attendance rates;

enrollment patterns in advanced courses; discipline referrals; student work; and survey or focus group data from students, teachers, or parents. Teacher leaders, while recognizing the need for evidence, are flexible and creative in their use of that data.

Recognizing an Opportunity and Taking Initiative

A critical characteristic of leadership is the ability to take initiative. When asked for examples of teachers who have demonstrated leadership, educators consistently cite individuals who have taken initiative in addressing a problem or in improving the school's instructional program.

All three teachers discussed in Chapter 1 demonstrated this characteristic. Margaret was troubled by student engagement, or lack of it, in the museum's offerings. But she did not simply wring her hands or complain to her colleagues. Instead, she thought it through. She set up a meeting with the museum staff to explore options. She discussed the idea with her principal. In other words, she took initiative. So did Elena. Elena was motivated less by a problem than by an opportunity to improve. That is, the previous method of assigning students to teachers was not causing difficulty; the school could have continued it with no ill effects. But Elena saw what she thought might be an opportunity for improvement and initiated a focused examination of looping. And Tom, as a result of examining the data, initiated a project to look beneath the data to try to understand the causes for the numbers.

An important aspect of taking initiative consists of looking around and being alert to opportunities for improvement; in that sense, it is the opposite of complacency. Teacher leaders are never content with the status quo, recognizing that no matter how successful a school is, it could always be at least a little bit better. So the skill of taking initiative is coupled with an ongoing quest for, and commitment to, improvement.

Mobilizing People Around a Common Purpose

A teacher leader is able to describe a vision for a better future and can communicate it clearly and persuasively enough to colleagues to help them both see its potential and join in the effort. A teacher leader does not simply see an opportunity and take initiative to address it all alone. Instead, he engages others in the project. Furthermore, the approach is invitational, perhaps taking the form of, "I've been noticing that _____, and I wonder whether _____ couldn't help us address it. What do you think? Do

you agree that it is a problem? Do you think that might work? Or is there a better approach?"

Again, all three teachers involved others in their approach. But it should also be recognized that they all had done some preliminary reading and thinking. Elena made herself familiar with the workings of looping before she mobilized her colleagues to examine it more deeply. Margaret had preliminary conversations with the museum staff before she developed the idea of the BIG Lesson sufficiently to describe it to other teachers. And Tom summarized the enrollment data before he made his initial presentation to the full faculty. In all three cases, the concept as implemented was somewhat different from (and presumably better than) the original idea. In Tom's case, the initial effort was to collect information and gain an understanding of the factors that were contributing to the findings. In all cases, the projects took on lives of their own, shaped by their originators but also influenced by the perspectives of others. The vision remained constant—that is the role of the leader—but the details of action resulted from collegial conversation and deliberation.

In addition, at the stage when Margaret's and Elena's ideas were to be put into action, the parents of the students involved had to be convinced of the merits of the plan. This is an important communication requirement, and one for which they both needed and took advantage of the principal's essential role as the official voice of the school to the outside world. In addition to fostering parent understanding of and support for the plan, communicating the idea to parents is an important step in refining the plan itself. In the course of the discussion, parents may have suggestions to strengthen the approach.

Marshaling Resources and Taking Action

At some point, it is time to take action, to try something. This "something" can range from embarking on a large-scale new project to approaching a business to ask for lab equipment. In the end, talking about doing something is not sufficient. Teacher leaders can do their homework, they can talk to colleagues, and they can conduct research, but they may have to simply commit to a course of action without fully knowing its consequences. At some point in the planning and implementation of a project, it is essential to make a commitment to action. In other words, talking can go on only so long before people become restive at the lack of real action. Teacher leaders provide the energy for

that action; they are the individuals who, at the appropriate point, are willing to roll up their sleeves and just do it.

It is a reality of school life that resources are sometimes needed, such as funds to pay for conference fees, an outside consultant, or substitute teachers, to provide teachers with the opportunity to meet. These resources may be assembled from school funds or from outside the school; in either case, they need to be garnered. The teacher leader may be the one who will take the initiative in obtaining resources, although frequently the assistance of the site administrator is needed.

To try her idea of a weeklong museum study trip, Margaret needed buses for five days' travel to the museum, rather than the one day typically allocated per class. She also hoped to enlist volunteer help during each of the days, and her lesson plans required some additional materials and supplies. All in all, she required additional resources to implement the extended study lesson, and she solicited them, with the help of her principal, from "downtown," from the parents of her students, and from the museum itself. In later years, as the project spread to other schools and communities, she was able to obtain support from the state government and from a foundation grant.

Elena's initial requirements were more modest. She did the initial exploration of looping on her own, but when she attracted the interest of colleagues, they appealed to the principal for funds to be used to purchase some books and articles, to give teachers time to hold extended planning meetings, and to visit schools where the practice was in use. These needed resources were not enormous, but neither were they negligible. When it came time to implement the looping plan, the teachers discovered that they needed professional development to be effective with students in grade levels different from those they had been teaching. That is, when the 1st grade teacher moved with her class to 2nd grade, or when the 4th grade teacher moved with her class to the 5th grade, she had work to do in learning the curricula and the teaching methods for older students.

In Tom's case, also, the resources needed initially were modest and primarily consisted of substitutes who could relieve the members of the study group from a small portion of their classroom responsibilities so they could meet together and observe one another's classrooms. But the interview questions for students, the observation protocols, and the subsequent data analysis were strengthened by the participation of an evaluation expert paid for by school funds. In addition, for the research reading portion

of the project, the teachers wanted to purchase a few books and locate relevant articles for discussion.

Monitoring Progress and Adjusting the Approach as Conditions Change

Teacher leaders are alert to changing conditions and unexpected outcomes. In other words, they recognize that nothing is ever finished; everything is subject to revision and improvement. This applies to almost any sphere of school life in which a teacher leader would operate, from a new program for students, to an approach to professional development for colleagues, to a partnership with the business community.

Monitoring of progress is accompanied by skill in reflection. Teacher leaders engage in critical reflection on the consequences of actions, on the impact of an approach on student learning. The power of reflection on the practice of teaching has been well documented (Kolb, 1984), and teacher leaders engage in critical reflection on their own teaching. They extend this habit of mind to other projects with which they are involved, ensuring that difficulties are recognized and adjustments are made as the work progresses.

Margaret's BIG Lesson concept has been evolving since its inception. It has expanded significantly to include five locations, and teachers and institutions all over the state are now involved. In addition, the Internet has become a significant resource for the project, since it enables teachers to share ideas with one another and precludes the need for teachers to develop every lesson from scratch. Other teachers have contributed their own ideas as to where to take the concept of the BIG Lesson, exploring collaborations with organizations in their own communities.

The looping concept, as implemented, represented a modification of the models the study group examined; that is, none of the schools they visited or read about had an approach that Elena's group thought would fit perfectly at Elm Ridge. And even as they were engaged in their detailed planning year, the teachers discovered that some of their initial plans had to be altered.

Tom's examination of the achievement gap was always expected to evolve as the members of the study group learned more. The project was established as an exploration—initially an exploration of the causes of the gaps in participation and achievement, which was later extended to an exploration of the teachers' own practices that might contribute to such gaps. Once some of these factors were identified, the shape and direction of the project changed accordingly. And, as Tom and his colleagues

would fully admit, the project is not finished; indeed, there is probably no such thing as “finished” in such an effort.

Adjusting the approach does not always mean making minor changes. It is conceivable that as a project moves forward, the participants may recognize that the entire approach is misguided. That is, the adjustment could take the form of subjecting it to a major overhaul or even abandoning the effort.

Sustaining the Commitment of Others and Anticipating Negativity

Teacher leadership involves, of course, enlisting the interest and support of colleagues in an identified area. But getting people involved is not sufficient; they need to stay involved. Many projects run into the sand when the initial flush is over, and people and behaviors return to their old patterns.

Sustaining the commitment of others involves skills of facilitation and group process, such as listening, joint problem solving, honoring other people’s ideas, maintaining focus, and knowing when to move forward. Teacher leaders are able to be clear about purpose and to remind colleagues of that purpose when needed, while conveying a genuine respect for the concerns and contributions of colleagues. In addition, they are not derailed by colleagues who choose not to become involved or who plant seeds of doubt with others to subtly undermine the effort.

All three teachers in our stories exercised skill and perseverance in maintaining the commitment of others as their projects moved forward. Margaret had to maintain her focus on the goal of richer contacts with the museum; it would have been easy and perhaps tempting to revert to a traditional field trip approach. But in her discussions with the museum staff, in her negotiations with her principal and district officials, and in her explanations of the approach to colleagues and parents of students in her class, Margaret demonstrated clarity of vision and persuasiveness in keeping others on board. To be sure, she adjusted the approach based on others’ thoughts and contributions, but her role in keeping people involved was vital.

Elena’s leadership in maintaining others’ commitment to looping was also essential. She had a vision and guided her colleagues to examine it closely. At the critical stage of making the concept a reality, she kept the energy level high and persuaded others to take on parts of the detailed planning, such as room allocation, materials, training, and parent meetings, that were needed to bring the concept to fruition.

In Tom's case, the need to maintain others' commitment was imperative, and indeed, he was not fully successful in that one teacher dropped out of the study group. But it could also be argued that convincing teachers to examine their practices deeply is more threatening than redesigning field trips as study trips. In any event, as Tom's study group moved forward in its work, and as teachers began to identify factors that contributed to the issue he had raised, Tom played a significant role in sustaining their commitment to the project. It became easier as time went on, particularly as the teachers began to see positive results from their efforts.

It is important to recognize that it is at this stage that many worthwhile projects falter. Teachers, after all, have important and time-consuming work in their own classrooms; in the popular vernacular, they already have day jobs. When a teacher leader approaches colleagues to become involved in an additional effort, it is just that: additional. Not all teachers, particularly those new to the profession, can take it on, even when someone else is providing the leadership. Convincing others to spend time on such a project and sustaining that commitment requires skills of persuasion and clarity of vision: in other words, leadership.

Contributing to a Learning Organization

It is not only individuals who learn, but organizations. As teachers in a school improve their practice and share their findings with colleagues, the collective wisdom increases. Furthermore, as more teachers are engaged in the pursuit of improved practice, the school itself becomes increasingly defined as an organization that learns. Of course, innovative practice is worth doing even when it is carried out by a single individual. However, it is only when shared that improved practice and the habit of improving practice can become institutionalized into the life of the school, or even more broadly. Teacher leaders make an active contribution to the school's collective wisdom not through bragging or attracting attention, but by sharing findings and extending the application of new practices.

Again, all three teachers have made significant contributions to their own schools and, more broadly, to the profession. Margaret's BIG Lesson concept is used all over Michigan, and educators everywhere can log onto the Web site to receive inspiration and perhaps ideas for their own planning. In Elena's case, looping has now become one of the local models. Not only have all the teachers in her school seen the benefits and a few drawbacks to the approach, but the school now hosts visits from educators

from other schools who are investigating the practice for possible implementation in their own settings. And Tom's group, by presenting their approach and findings to the school's faculty and to the faculties of other schools in the district, has made a substantial contribution to the collective understanding of all the district's educators.

Teacher leaders may also contribute to the collective wisdom of the profession through outreach to educators at other schools or presentations at state and local conferences. They recognize that the true benefits of improved practice are not realized when confined to a single setting; they must become incorporated into the more general professional community.

Dispositions

Dispositions largely define an individual's approach to situations; when we think about a person, we recall less about that person's skills or even interests than we do about their traits such as optimism and energy. Teacher leaders possess certain dispositions that influence their work with both students and colleagues. These dispositions share some characteristics with, but are not the same as, the habits of mind described by Art Costa and Bena Kallick (2000). Teacher leaders are "can do" people; they do not adopt a defeatist attitude when things go poorly. Instead, when the going gets tough, they get busy. But they don't forge ahead blindly; they weigh options, consider alternatives, and assemble colleagues to help solve problems.

So what are the dispositions that tend to define teacher leaders? This list does not purport to be comprehensive, but it provides a sense of the personalities of those teachers who emerge to lead their colleagues in important initiatives.

Deep Commitment to Student Learning

First of all, teacher leaders have an essential focus on the core mission of enhancing student learning. They never lose sight of that purpose, even when such a focus requires bucking the system or pointing out to colleagues that a proposed approach or an existing practice will undermine learning for some students.

It is not sufficient to espouse, as many educators do, that "all children can learn" and then continue to live and work in schools where many students are not learning or at least are not learning to their potential or even close to it. Teacher leaders know that this is not an acceptable situation, and they focus their energies on changing it. No matter what project they take on, these teachers recognize that the scale by which the

school and the efforts of the educators within it is measured is the extent to which it is able to promote high-level learning on the part of all students.

Optimism and Enthusiasm

Attempting new approaches or seeking better ways to achieve previous goals implies that a person believes that better results are possible. The teacher leader is not resigned to business as usual with less than optimal results. Instead, the actions of a teacher leader are driven by optimism and the belief that any situation can be improved.

Teacher leaders tend to look on the bright side of things. They hold high expectations for themselves and expect the best of others. When interpreting others' actions or statements, they tend to ascribe positive motives. This carries a danger, of course, of naiveté; it is possible to be sucked in by the words and promises of others. But the consequence of always doubting the motives of others is worse: it is cynicism. Teacher leaders, by taking an optimistic view of life, tend to steer events in a positive direction.

A characteristic that sets some people apart from others and can be highly motivational to colleagues is enthusiasm. An attitude of "Let's try it!" can infuse energy into an otherwise dispirited group of educators. This attitude is not, it should be clear, a matter of immature exuberance, where action is unrestrained by thought or planning. Instead, it represents energy to pursue a project with vigor and commitment.

Open-Mindedness and Humility

Teacher leaders are careful not to become stuck in their own ideas. They actively solicit the thoughts of others and ensure that those ideas receive careful consideration. In doing this, of course, they demonstrate the skill of looking at evidence, and indeed, they help specify what would even count as evidence of the success of a proposed approach. But as a disposition, open-mindedness conveys a willingness to consider alternatives rather than approaching colleagues with a full-fledged program that they are trying to convince colleagues to adopt. Such an approach may feel to other teachers like a solution in search of a problem.

In addition, open-mindedness is accompanied by humility. Teacher leaders don't assume that their own idea is the best one or indeed that a proposed course of action will turn out to be the best approach. They are quite willing to admit that they don't know everything and that information may surface that would cause a shift in their plan. This open-mindedness and humility, of course, are consequences of a deep

respect for colleagues and a commitment to collegiality. Respect and collegiality help to prevent the phenomenon, noted by some educators, of an energetic and skilled teacher who has lots of good ideas but a personality that can only be described as obnoxious. Teacher leaders who genuinely respect their colleagues and who convey the notion that the best ideas emerge from collective effort are rarely offensive to others.

Courage and Willingness to Take Risks

At times, teacher leaders must go out on a limb; success is not always guaranteed. In taking a new approach or persuading others to join in a project, they may have to go against the grain of traditional practice. Furthermore, they may be called on to gently and tactfully confront negativity or resistance from colleagues. Indeed, sometimes teacher leaders must find ways to challenge the larger school culture if it is characterized by cynicism and professional jealousy. The teacher leader is willing to swim upstream in such situations when the goal warrants it. Such actions require courage; school improvement is not for the faint of heart.

The connection between the courage of teacher leaders and the broader school culture is close. In order for educators to take risks, they must operate in an environment in which such courage is valued, where they are safe. This environment is established, by and large, by the administrative staff. But even within such a safe environment, not every teacher has the stomach to try a new approach, particularly one involving a significant departure from current practice; teacher leaders do.

Confidence and Decisiveness

Teacher leaders are individuals who have experienced success in their lives, frequently through their own hard work. Thus, they are reasonably confident of success in the future, provided they don't make avoidable mistakes. This expectation of success gives them a degree of confidence that rubs off on others; it is contagious. Everyone wants to be associated with a successful project; by conveying confidence, teacher leaders persuade others to join in the effort.

Confidence contributes to both courage and risk taking. Educators are not likely to step out and try something new if they do not have confidence in their ability to pull it off. So an underlying confidence is essential for teacher leaders: Confidence in their skill as teachers, confidence in their skill in thinking through a new approach, and confidence in their skill in persuading colleagues to join them.

Accompanying confidence is decisiveness. Teacher leaders know that when all is said and done, when the extensive discussions have run their course, action is necessary. This requires decisiveness in the face of uncertainty. Such decisiveness is accompanied, of course, by openness to the changing situation and conditions. It is not rational to pursue a course when it has become clear that it is not successful. So decisiveness is always accompanied by flexibility. But teacher leaders do not allow uncertainty to paralyze them and keep them from taking a course of action they believe to be the right one.

Tolerance for Ambiguity

Projects undertaken by teacher leaders are rarely planned in detail in advance. Instead, they are undertaken in response to a need or an opportunity and are subject to multiple midcourse corrections. It is in the nature of school improvement that many of the important issues can neither be known in advance nor planned for in detail. Therefore teacher leaders, in convincing colleagues to participate in a project, are inviting people to join them on a journey. They must be comfortable with the unstructured nature of the endeavor and be able to make adjustments as needed. But more important, teacher leaders do not feel the need for a detailed roadmap before the journey begins. They are able to go with the flow and are able to coordinate seemingly disparate aspects of a situation in their minds simultaneously. Teacher leaders can't be rigid in their approach.

Creativity and Flexibility

Teaching and learning are complex endeavors, and schools are complex places. Even if an educator encounters a program or practice that seems to have merit and wants to implement it in her own setting, it is unlikely to be able to be imported wholesale. At the very least, the program or practice will have to be modified to fit the environment. Some situations won't have models; in those cases, educators must create their own solutions. Teacher leaders are able to think creatively and flexibly and can encourage their colleagues to do the same.

Few projects move along as planned; adjustments are needed. Teacher leaders don't become trapped by their idea, sticking with it even in the face of evidence that it should be modified. They are flexible, able to stay true to the goal but willing to adjust the approach as needed.

Perseverance

Although flexibility is important, so is perseverance. A lot of success in implementing a new approach consists of holding firm even in the face of initial difficulty or resistance. The first attempt at anything is, practically by definition, more difficult than subsequent efforts will be. Everything is unknown and unfamiliar, and there are no established patterns. But as time goes on, routines are established and educators become more comfortable in the new practice.

Perseverance is not the same as stubbornness, of course; it must be tempered by flexibility and informed by reflection. But assuming that such reflection and flexibility are present, then an attitude of not giving up can inspire confidence in others. It gives them the strength to stay the course when they may be tempted to abandon it.

Willingness to Work Hard

Teacher leaders know that projects don't take care of themselves. They must be planned and implemented. Good ideas, without the hard work of planning and implementation, remain just good ideas. Real change, as Adam Urbanski (2004) has famously reminded us, is real hard. But teacher leaders are not only willing to work hard; they devise ways to work smart. And as noted above, they persevere in the face of setbacks and obstacles.



These dispositions are not displayed one at a time by teacher leaders; rather, they constitute a cluster of traits and ways of looking at the world that tend to reinforce one another. Teacher leaders are confident, open-minded, enthusiastic, optimistic, and flexible. They persevere and are willing to work both hard and smart. These traits, as much as the specific ideas teacher leaders bring to a project, motivate their colleagues to join in and stay with that project.

All three teachers described in Chapter 1 displayed these traits. They approached their projects with energy and enthusiasm, optimistic that their efforts would yield positive benefits. They were open-minded to new approaches and persevered in their pursuit of a goal. And in convincing others to join them in the effort, they were not only persuasive but they also demonstrated both creativity and flexibility. Tom, in particular, was also courageous; he offered his own teaching as the first example of practice for his colleagues to examine. Taking that sort of risk required courage and trust in his colleagues